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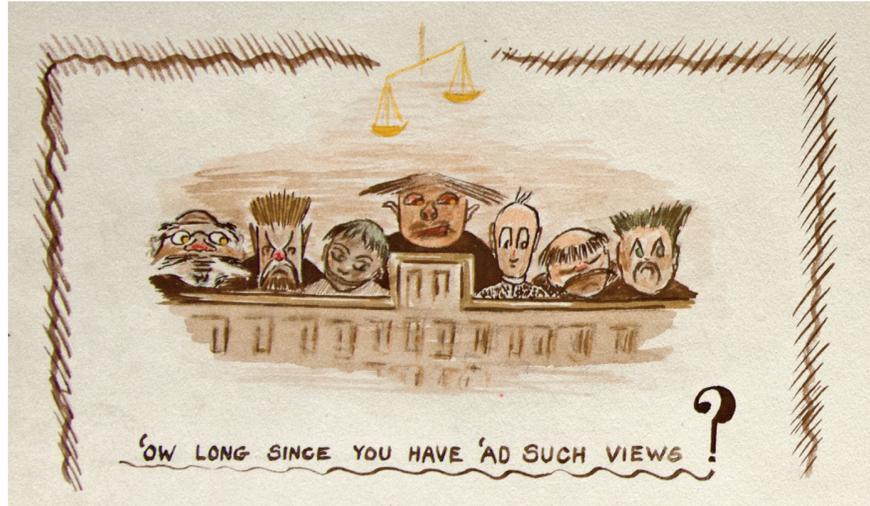


Illustration from Harold Brown's Autograph book. Many COs kept such autograph books with comments and drawings from fellow COs.

THE TRIBUNALS

One of the consequences of Conscription was that so many men would be called that ordinary life could not carry on: coal had to be mined, fields ploughed and tanks built.

Hundreds of Tribunals were set up all around the country to handle 2 million applications for exemption from military service. Though meant to be impartial when it came to Conscientious Objectors many Tribunal members couldn't even understand the CO's position. They did not judge fairly or relate to men making this difficult and unpopular choice. The military representative on every Tribunal was very critical and did not want to let 'shirkers' get away. Consequently the Tribunals' decisions were often spiteful and unfair.



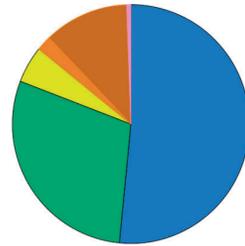
The men of Preston Tribunal. Note the military representative on the right.

Some 20,000 men claimed exception on conscientious grounds. These were the conscientious objectors. They refused to be forced into the army and take part in war for moral, religious or political reasons. They would not allow themselves to be forced to fight and kill.

No real thought had been given as to how to deal with Conscientious Objectors. The simple option of sending them home was rejected as men were killing each other by the tens of thousands across the channel and letting these 'shirkers' free would have produced some sensational headlines. Even for sympathetic Tribunals sending COs home was almost impossible despite the fact that this was a clear provision in the law.

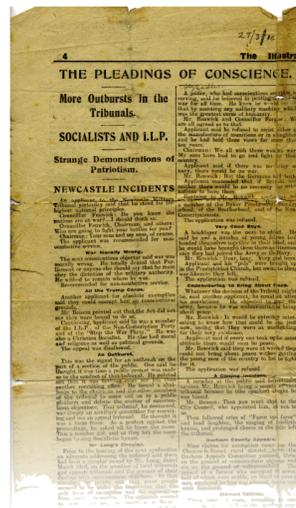


Conscientious objector Eric Chappelow, being escorted to military prison for refusing to put on a uniform. April 1916. He sang 'Marseillaise' in French while waiting for sentence.



Motivation for becoming a conscientious objector came from a variety of beliefs.

Even when the Tribunal accepted that a man had a 'genuine and sincere' conscientious objection they usually failed to give an 'Absolute' exemption. Less than 100 are known to have received such exemption. As many viewed COs to be dangerous radicals undermining the war effort, the Tribunals' decisions, poor at best or vicious at worst, were easy to ignore.



The most common verdict was 'Exemption from Combatant Service'. Others would be offered a number of choices or simply dismissed. Having been graded, categorised and their conscience scrutinised they were faced with another far from easy decision.

What would their conscience allow them to accept?

Just two months after Britain declaring war Lilla Brockway felt that 'the time had come to gather together all those who would refuse to be driven to the murder of their fellows if conscription came.'



She suggested to her husband Fenner who was the editor of the 'Labour Leader' to publish a letter inviting people to get in touch. The response was enthusiastic.



THE NO CONSCRIPTION FELLOWSHIP

A small group protesting against conscription was formed and soon had thousands of supporters, staff and its own offices. It became the heart and soul of the British peace movement.

The NCF worked against the introduction of conscription through supporters around the country - a network that would become indispensable in the years to come.

Despite the efforts of the No-Conscription Fellowship and others Conscription was passed into law. The law was simple but sinister – from March 1916, all men between 18 and 41 were automatically enlisted in the army. They did not have to join, by law, they were already soldiers! The lives of millions of men were no longer their own.

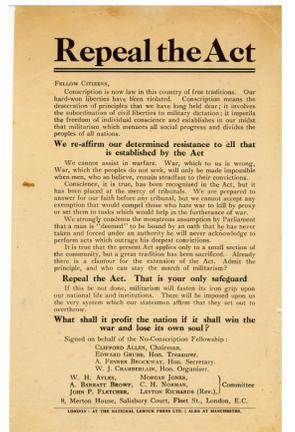
Whatever their beliefs, occupations or the circumstances of their lives, every man became, with the passing of the Act, a soldier. Men now had to argue before Tribunals to be exempted and the NCF was there to support these men.



The No Conscription Committee outside Mansion House Court before being jailed for publishing the Repeal the Act leaflet. Walter Ayles, Will Chamberlain, A. Barratt Brown, Clifford Allen, Fenner Brockway and J.P Fletcher



About the case



The No Conscription Fellowship National Committee was prosecuted for publishing this leaflet because it would 'prejudice recruiting, training discipline or administration of His Majesty's forces.' Committee members were fined and imprisoned. The case received far more publicity than any distribution of the leaflet would have achieved.

JANUARY 1917 PEACE NEGOTIATIONS ABORTED

November 1918 ARMISTICE SIGNED